Expert Uses Polygraph

Your Plants May Be Perceptive

By Ron Shaffer
Washington Post Staff Writer

Cleve Backster, 48, is a lie detector specialist who after years of tests and observation, has concluded that plants perceive more than we might suspect.

For instance, Backster says, plants are aware of people and sense their intentions, and react by sending out signals that can be recorded by a polygraph machine (lie detector).

A plant in danger may go into its equivalent of human shock, Backster says. On the other hand, he says a loved plant will prosper.

Backster is the director of a New York polygraph school for law enforcement officials and has been working with lie detectors for 24 years. During the last six years, he has also been making polygraph studies of plants.

His work with plants, which has been dismissed as implausible by many area scientists, began in 1966, he recalled, when in a moment of diversion he decided to hook polygraph electrodes to the leaves of an office plant.

"Surprisingly, the contour lines on the charts were similar to typical reactions of a human," he said in an interview yesterday. He spoke to spiritualist-oriented groups in the metropolitan area Sunday and Monday.

"I thought about testing its reactions and decided to burn it with a match. At that very instant the recording pen bounced off the top of the chart."

Backster said his life hasn't been the same since.

"The initial result indicated that plants have some sort of perceptive ability," he said.

In subsequent tests, he said he found that plants emitted a straight line on the chart, or went into "nonproductivity" when a certain botanist entered the room. The botanist, he discovered, destroyed plants in the course of her work.

After the botanist left, the plant would slowly recover and after 30 minutes would send out normal signals, he said.

Another test showed that

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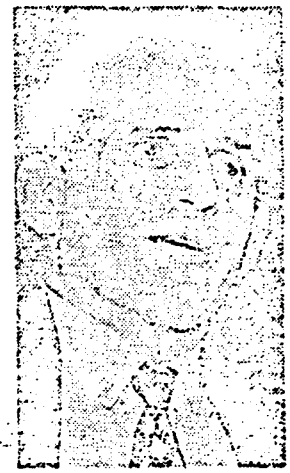

CLEVE BACKSTER
... "loved plant prospers"

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PLANTS, From C1

a plant could "identify," with an exaggerated reaction on the graph, one man in a group of six who minutes before had destroyed another plant in the room.

"I also found that whenever I talked about my office plant, no matter what part of the country I was in, the plant would show a corresponding reaction on the charts, at exactly the same moment I was talking about it," Backster said.

Backster said that these and other of the "thousands" of observations he has made "leads me to believe that plants have a sense of perception that goes beyond our basic five senses."

He said he has found that a plant has an "attunement" with its owner and reacts to praise.

"When people go on vacations," he said, "I often suggest they take along a picture of a plant and think about it." This insures its health, he says.

Backster, who said he has received little criticism from anyone about his theories, said that plant perception could someday be used to thwart airplane hijackers by keeping a plant at the gate to sense bad intentions. Military personnel, he said, have suggested that a plant might be taken on patrols to tip off soldiers of impending ambushes.

Backster said he receives funds for his research from small grants and from the profits of his school.

"Private organizations, and the government, too, don't want to sponsor research they think might wind up embarrassing to them," he said.

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"My dear sir, does this research seem reasonable to you?" asked an incredulous Dr. Robert Krauss, head of the botany department at the University of Maryland.

Dr. Joseph Graham, an agricultural administrator at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, said that the department conducts research only on high priority problems, and he did not think that Backster's findings would fall into that category.

"We can't say anything is impossible," he said, "but (what Backster suggests) seems highly improbable."